

Telephone interview with Capt. Stavros S. Moungelis, USMC, (Ret.), former sergeant, helicopter crew chief and member of HMR-161 during the Korean War. Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, 24 July 2001. (Died 2016.)

When were you in Korea?

I was in Korea for a total of two years between December of '52 and December of '54, well beyond the so-called armistice at Panmunjom. The missions our squadron flew included many flights to Panmunjom transporting people who were attending the peace talks and later for the prisoner exchange. I stayed on after the war ended in July of '53. It seems to me that we worked a lot harder with our helicopters after that period than we did during the war. We rebuilt bunkers and that type of thing, including exercises and maneuvers.

Here are some squadron firsts from my notes, all of which occurred before I got to Korea. In July of '52 our squadron made the first night landing aboard the hospital ship *Repose* with a patient from the C Med Company.

In August of '52 there was a surgical team that was lifted from one medical company to another. This was previously done by 6 x 6 trucks and would take several hours. The entire 1st Marine Division sector was within a 15-minute reach because of the helicopters.

What kind of helicopters did you use?

Our helicopters were the HRS-2s made by Sikorsky which replaced the model HRS-1's. Later the HRS-2's were replaced by the first model run of the HRS-3's..

What unit were you attached to?

HMR-161. That stands for Helicopter Marine Transport Squadron 161. We were of the first Marine Aircraft Wing. HMR-161 was attached to the 1st Marine Division. It was the same for the other helicopter and aircraft observation squadron--VMO-6. They would take the wounded from the back side of a hill where a battle was raging to a med station. We took them from the med station to the hospital ships. VMO-6 also did spotter work for artillery, observation, downed pilot rescue, and recon flights.

Did they also fly the Sikorsky?

No. VMO-6 had the HTL Bells. They were down a valley behind us about five miles.

As a crew chief, you were in charge of the passengers and the load.

Yes, but we crew chiefs had no responsibility for the patients. We crew chiefs never had any special training for that. There was no specific procedure. We just did it.

Did you carry supplies?

Oh, yes, including some critical medical supplies from the hospital ships to the med stations, not all medical supplies.

Where was your squadron located?

We were just east of the 1st Marine Division CP (command post). Our location was east of Munsun-yi and south of Panmunjom. There was a main supply route that split our camp. There were tents on the north side, and on the south side of the road (it had been rice paddies) that we graveled and oiled to make helo pads. The most helicopters we had at any one time was

about 15. We had our rear echelon between Inchon and Seoul, a place called Yongdung-po, also referred to as ASCOM City. I believe those initials may have stood for Army Supply Command.

We took over what had been a World War II Japanese ammunition factory. We converted the ground floor into an office, mess hall, showers, one stall barber, and shops for heavy maintenance--transmission and engine changes and that type of thing. We turned the second floor into a barracks and the roof into a night movie. The heads were the outdoor type. We were living good, here away from the MLR (Main Line of Resistance).

I also remember that there was some periodic socializing between the hospital ship nurses, doctors, and our helicopter pilots at our forward echelon O club--a double tent--nothing elaborate.. They would be invited to come out there and have a steak fry, and some drinks, and songs. We'd pick them up at the hospital ship and then return them later that evening.

I also vividly recall a hospital ship assigned doctor meeting a VMO-6 helicopter and walking into a vertical tail rotor. He was decapitated, a most tragic accident.

How many patients did your squadron normally handle a month?

In a typical month we had 30 medevacs. According to my notes, one month we transported 74 casualties to the hospital ships. Sometimes there were up to three ships there in Inchon harbor. Some ships were from Denmark and the Netherlands.

How many patients could the HRS-2 carry?

They could carry a maximum of three litter patients internally in the cabin. You could put two on one bulkhead and one on the other. Sometimes, when we just had one patient, we just put him on the deck. Or if we only had two, we could put them on the deck and not even strap the litters into the wall. We would fly with one or two pilots and a crew chief. It was not common practice to bring a doctor or corpsman with the patient on those trips and rarely did we have a corpsman or a doctor that accompanied a patient on our medevacs. I preferred one pilot so I could get some "stick" time flying back home. Most crew chiefs could fly if the situation dictated including take off and landing. I accumulated many stick time hours as I knew all the sites in our sector. I was used to familiarize newly assigned pilots to our squadron.

You say, you did not have a corpsman with you?

That's correct.

Where did you pick up the patients?

We'd always pick them up from one of the med stations--Able, Baker, Charlie, and Easy Med. We never went inside one. The outside was just a series of big tents and looked primitive.

So, you normally would pick up a patient that had already been stabilized.

They had been stabilized and were at a point where they could be transported. If these patients had to go by truck and barge to the hospital ship, I don't know what their chances would have been in making it.

Then they were stable enough not to require any kind of medical monitoring.

That's correct. And, although there were medevacs done during the day, they were usually done at night and most of those night flights took place between 8 o'clock and 2 a.m.

Why were they done at night?

I don't know.

Was it a ground fire problem?

The danger of ground fire never entered into it because we were south of the action by several miles. It wasn't like Vietnam where we never knew where the hell the enemy was.

What was a typical daily routine?

We'd be there standing by awaiting whatever missions came down for the day. We had an operations section. They had a liaison person, probably an aviator, over at the 1st Marine Division headquarters to see what the daily workload would be. The requests were then passed to our squadron operations, and our flight line would then get the word and we would be assigned these missions. We had all kinds of missions. Our main job over there was not confined to medical evacuations. We did troops lifts, reconnaissance and rocket launcher flights. There was a period of major floods when we carried supplies that normally would have gone by road. This included bunker materials, sandbags, ammunition, water, rations, all logistics for the 1st Marine Division.

Let's say you got a call for doing a medevac from Able Med to a hospital ship. How did that work?

We'd fly into Able Med and stay turned up. That is, we didn't shut down the engine. They would be waiting for us and would bring the Marine out on a stretcher. Usually, they had one or two patients. Very seldom did we get three at a time. We preferred to have one or two instead of three. That way we didn't have to put one on the wall.

If you had two patients . . .

We'd just place them on the floor. If we had three, we'd hang two on one bulkhead and one on the other.

You had sling hooks attached to the bulkhead?

Exactly. And then there were straps that came down from the middle of the cabin ceiling to hold the one side of the stretcher--front and rear.

Did you have to have intravenous bottles running.

Sometimes. There was one occasion . . . It was a night flight. The patient, as far as I remember, was almost dead. I recall his arm. It was just emaciated. It looked as though he had been on a starvation diet for three months. At night the lighting inside the helicopter cabin was very dim. There was something like a flashlight on the ceiling that you could pull on down on a long cord and direct to read a map or whatever you were doing. But it was not bright light at all. This Marine had an IV that had been placed in a leg vein. Well, the damn thing had fallen out. I don't think he pulled it out consciously. It looked like it hadn't been taped down properly. I was concerned but glad that we were at least half way to the hospital ship by this time. I took the needle end of the line and stuck it into the head of his penis. I didn't know if it did any good or not.

We landed aboard that hospital ship a day or two later and a doctor came out. We had already delivered our patient, and were getting ready to depart.

He then said, "Did you come in here last night with a patient that had an IV in his penis?"
I said, "Yes. I did that."
He then said, "You probably saved his life."

How did you know to do that?

The penis is a big vein full of blood.

Had you ever seen that done before?

No. But I had heard the penis is a blood vessel. I don't think I could have succeeded inserting it in the arm or leg. I didn't have enough light. I don't know whether that man pulled through or not but I do know that he was still alive the day after we delivered him.

When you got airborne during one of these night flights, how did you find the hospital ship?

On clear nights, the ship was all lit up. You could easily spot it. For bad weather night flights, they had a big searchlight on the ship and they would just throw it up into the sky. This helped when the weather was bad--cloudy and so forth. We flew in any weather. We were very seldom grounded. It would take a hell of a storm to ground us.

Once you landed, the corpsmen and other personnel came out and picked up the patient.

Yes. And we were gone inside of five minutes. It took about a half hour to ferry the patients from the med station to the hospital ship. The total mission was about an hour and a half from the time we took off until the time we landed back at our unit.

We have some photos in our archives showing the HO5S helicopter. What were they like?

It was very low to the ground. The front also opened up. Although it usually accommodated two pilots, they could remove the left cycle stick and open the front. One stretcher could then be placed inside beside the pilot, where the other pilot would normally sit. There was also a side door rear of the pilot. You could put one stretcher inside in that fashion, but not two. The Sikorsky HO5S didn't have too long a history. It was very underpowered. We hardly used it in the summer. The hotter the weather got the less gas you could take up and that impacted your mission. My favorite was the HRS-2, the "workhorse" of the Korean War. Our squadron crest was inscribed "Equitatus Caili" Cavalry from the Sky.

Do you have any idea how many wounded you may have transported while you were in Korea?

If I had to estimate how many wounded I transported from a med station to a hospital ship, I would guess probably not more than a hundred. That one patient with the needle business was the only one that I had occasion to attend to.

What do you remember about the prisoner exchange?

After the armistice in July '53, we participated in the prisoner exchange. We transported a lot of the seriously sick and/or wounded POWs to an army hospital near Seoul. Most of the people were able to walk; a few were not, but almost all our released prisoners went by

helicopter to an Army field hospital near Seoul for processing. It was a real crazy situation. There was something in the agreement that we must use Indian Gurka troops to take care of security at the prisoner exchange. The Gurkas came to Inchon Harbor by British aircraft carrier and the deal was that they could not set foot on North or South Korean territory. So the task of transporting these professional soldiers from the British carrier to Panmunjom was up to us, and we transported them by helicopter to neutral no-man's land. The Brits were not permitted to help with their on-board helicopters. They closely resembled the HRS's but they had a shot gun shell starter for the engine.

Did you transport any of the POWs?

Yes. It was very, very sad--horrible. There had been some effort to clean up the American POWs before they were released, but the Republic of South Korean prisoners (ROK's) and KMC's (Korean Marine Corps) that had been held up in the north . . . This was probably the worst sight I've ever seen in my entire life. A lot of them were on stretchers, crutches, or double canes.

As I understand it, these prisoners were trucked down from the north to what was called "Freedom Village," near Panmunjom. And you saw all this?

Yes.

What was your role at that point?

To take a couple of them at a time to the Army field hospital near Seoul. The whole squadron was involved with this. If they were on stretchers, we could take a maximum of three. If they were ambulatory, maybe we could take one or two more, depending upon whether I had one pilot or two. Other South Korean POW's were transported by 6 x 6 trucks, upon carrier vehicles, jeeps, and field ambulances.

When there was an outbreak of hemorrhagic fever, we also took patients from the med stations to only that Army hospital. The soldiers and Marines I transported were out of it, almost comatose. I understood that if they came out of it in two or three days they would live. If they didn't they died. That's all I know about that disease, other than it came from rodents, flies, and mosquitoes that feasted on troops killed on the battlefield, then bit survivors. To this very day, I take a minimum of three great showers every day!

A related incident. After that, I was rotated out of Korea via Japan, then by troop ship to Treasure Island, San Francisco under the Oakland Bridge for several weeks of processing. We finally were released to go on leave and onto our next assignment. I had bought a new Crown Victoria 2-door hardtop "convertible" and along with another HMR-161 Marine, Msgt. Michael Tucci as my copilot/switch driver, we started driving to Manchester, NH via Quantico, VA. We stopped for gas outside of San Francisco, the attendant was filling her up and kept staring at me. Msgt. Tucci and I were both in our greens. When he came to my window to be paid he asked me if I was in helicopters. He said that I was the crew chief of the helicopter that took him to the hospital ship and that he would never forget my face. I truthfully could not make the connection. There was nothing on our uniforms that would indicate we were helicopter people, but I believed him.

When the war ended we were told we would go home whenever the Marine Corps said we would and that was it! The Republic of Korea congress had a tie vote on permitting the North Korean and Chinese POW's to stay in South Korea. Most of these POW's did not want to

be repatriated (sent back home). They had it better as POW's than at any other times in their lives. Syngman Rhee, the President of South Korea, had to break the tie vote. He voted to send them home. He had enough trouble on his plate/rice bowl. This upset the POW's and led to demonstrations and upheaval in the POW camps to the point that they rioted and tried to get over two barbed wire fences. Several were shot and killed before it was quelled.

For the next 40 years I was always of the opinion that these POW's were sent back to their mother countries against their wishes and probably executed. While I was an American Legion Post Commander Adelphia Post No. 38 Washington, DC (1991-92) I was able to convince a retired U.S. Army colonel to talk to our members about world changes due to the end of the Cold War. Some time during his presentation he indicated that at the end of the Korean War he was working in the White House and as an aide to President Truman. He said he went to President Truman about the enemy prisoners' plight; they didn't want to go home. The colonel's plan which President Truman approved was to ship these POW's after arrangements were made with several countries in Southeast Asia/Indochina, Singapore, etc to take these POW's. They did and I'm confident most of them became good citizens and were emphatically anti-communism/pro democracy. All these years I thought they were all killed back home, etc. as I had never read or knew otherwise.

What a testimony to democracy and freedom. For that knowledge alone, I know that my service in Korea and later Vietnam was honorable and godly. I prefer to think about the lives I may have saved as opposed to the lives I know I helped take.